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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 001627

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SUBJECT: 'NO EXIT' - SENIOR TRT OFFICIAL ON THE WAY OUT OF THE DEADLOCK

REF: BANGKOK 1472 (EAP DAS JOHN MEETS WITH THAKSIN'S BRAIN TRUST)

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce reason 1.4 (b) (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Ambassador and Minister of Education Chaturon Chaisaeng discussed possible scenarios to resolve the political deadlock on March 16. According to Chaturon, PM Thaksin might consider stepping down as Prime Minister 'temporarily,' but only after he receives the vindication of a substantial vote for him in the April 2 elections. Then he could step aside "for the good of the country," and preserve his option to return to politics later. However, Chaturon could not describe a likely scenario in which that move is followed by a politically acceptable outcome to the current impasse. Chaturon is concerned that the PM may wait too late to make a decision, and this could have a negative impact on Thai democracy and, not incidentally, on TRT's fate. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Ambassador met March 16 with Chaturon Chaisaeng, Minister of Education and a senior member of the ruling Thai Rak Thai party (TRT). Chaturon is one of the more well regarded members of the cabinet, as much for his level-headedness as his credentials as a student leader in the political protests of the 1970s. The Ambassador told Chaturon that we see the current political situation as a Thai problem, for Thais to solve. We were however, very interested to hear his views on the political situation. Chaturon outlined the various possible ways forward to resolve the political deadlock between Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his opposition. All scenarios, however, run up against seemingly immovable objects, most often the ego or interests of the PM or his senior advisors.

TEMPORARY BREAK

¶3. (C) Chaturon described the PM's dilemma. The PM is considering options in which he agrees to take a "temporary break" from the leadership. However, he wants to have the validation of an election, in which he would demonstrate that he still has wide support. After the election on April 2, once he has proven he is still "beloved" by the people, then he might be prepared to announce that he will not be Prime Minister during the next Parliament, for the good of the country. He has already announced that this next Parliament would be in session for only about one year, to consider constitutional changes and "political reform," and then there would be new elections.

¶4. (C) However, there are several obvious reasons why this scenario will not break the political deadlock, according to Chaturon:

-- Thai Rak Thai is expected to take virtually all the seats in the Parliament, given the absence of a real opposition. Therefore, the constitutional reform would be carried out by TRT exclusively, which will not be acceptable to the opposition. The opposition demonstrations would continue; the conflict would remain unresolved. Further, Chaturon does not believe that the Thai people will accept a one-party parliament.

-- Then there is the problem of even seating the Parliament, given the large number of races that may not result in a valid winner, due to technicalities with the election law. It is widely presumed that the constitution requires all 500 seats to be filled before the Parliament can sit and elect a government. The only solution to that problem that Chaturon could suggest is recourse to Article 7 of the constitution, which would allow the King to intervene and authorize a Parliament with fewer than 500 MPs to convene and function. Again, this extraordinary step to solve one problem only brings Thailand back to the next unacceptable situation -- an all-TRT parliament.

ENDING THE BOYCOTT

15. (C) What about scenarios which get the opposition parties back into the race? Chaturon noted that the Election Commission was considering recommending a delay in the elections until the last week in April (60 days after the dissolution - the maximum time allowed by the Constitution). This would permit more time, perhaps, to get the other parties to participate.

BANGKOK 00001627 002 OF 003

16. (C) Why wouldn't this work?

-- The other parties would only participate, we all agreed, if there were a clear and public assurance from the PM that he would step down after the elections. But the whole point of the elections, to Thaksin, is to claim vindication by getting a large vote supporting him. Chaturon pointed out all the TRT posters (set up all over Bangkok, and presumably the country) that say "Vote for TRT -- Vote for Thaksin to be Prime Minister." If Thaksin announces that he won't be PM, he loses his shot at vindication, and TRT loses its main weapon to turn out the vote.

-- The longer the wait until elections, the more unpredictable and dangerous the situation gets. Chaturon was particularly concerned about the possibility of violence. With some irony, he noted that Bangkok people are privileged, "not like the people in the South." In the South there are 2,000 people dead, and the government is not affected. "If 10 people die in Bangkok," however, Thaksin is finished, and TRT is finished also. Thaksin would be unable to return to political life afterwards, and TRT would probably split up.

-- The opposition is not unified, and some elements of it would not accept any deal along these lines. They want Thaksin vilified, exiled, stripped of his "ill-gotten gains." However, Chaturon still had friends within the opposition coalition, and believed that many of them would accept a compromise solution, if one could be found.

GAME THEORY

17. (C) In Chaturon's assessment, the issue of timing is crucial. The sooner Thaksin can find an acceptable and dignified way to step down, the higher his chances are of returning to power after an interval. TRT would stay together in the meantime, unified by the expectation that he would return to lead the party again. Thaksin might have to accept that some independent commission would investigate the

Shin Corp sale or other business dealings, but Chaturon was confident they would not find anything illegal. The longer Thaksin waits, however, the higher the chance of something happening that would make it impossible for him to come back. "The Thai often make decisions ... (long pause) ... late," Chaturon said. He bemoaned the PM's decision to dissolve Parliament rather than resign. Chaturon said that he had argued against the dissolution, "because it wouldn't solve anything." If Thaksin had resigned, TRT would still be sitting pretty with 375 MPs, and the opposition would have nothing to protest about. The whole problem would blow over.

CAN HE MAKE IT TO APRIL 2?

¶8. (C) Chaturon acknowledged that it was not a foregone conclusion that Thaksin could even make it to the April 2 election. Thaksin was suffering as more segments of society came out against him daily. If a broad consensus really emerged asking him to step down, he might not last until the elections. (Septel will report on some evidence of waning support for the PM in the countryside and in the TRT ranks.) Chaturon mentioned the importance of the business community in this regard. (Comment: we have been struck by the absence of a strong defense of Thaksin by the big business associations, who theoretically should support a strong leader who has been good for the economy. End comment)

¶9. (C) The Ambassador asked where Thaksin was getting his advice from, and what were the views of others within TRT? Chaturon acknowledged he was not able to discuss his views very widely within TRT. Many of Thaksin's close advisers were not ready to accept the idea of his resignation, even temporarily. (Among this group, he named Newin Chidchob and Pansak Vinyaratn, reftel). They still believed that TRT would get a lot of votes in the election, the technical problems would somehow be dealt with, and that TRT could come out on top in the end. Some of those who are running unopposed for seats in Bangkok and the South "just want a chance to be an MP for once."

A MATTER OF PRINCIPLE

¶10. (C) Chaturon emphasized that, first of all, he wanted to defend the Constitution. He did not agree with those in the opposition who wanted to have a new government without having any election at all (note -- a reference to the proposal to

BANGKOK 00001627 003 OF 003

have the King name a new PM and allow an interim government to amend the constitution and supervise new elections. end note.) He believed that it was very important to have an election and to stick to the principle of resolving issues through the vote and democratic means, not to take a step backward. Chaturon commented on the theory that the current crisis represented the death struggle of the old "Bangkok elite" against the new political forces, represented by the PM (reftel). "Neither side is black or white," he said, "they are both shades of gray."

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Chaturon is probably the most thoughtful and impressive senior TRT member we have spoken to during this crisis. For all his intelligence, however, he cannot come up with a likely scenario that leads to a peaceful and generally acceptable resolution of the political confrontation. From his description, it appears that we may be getting closer to some kind of solution, but key elements are not yet in place to bring the deal together. We believe that Chaturon is right in his assessment that, the longer Thaksin waits, the harder it will be to find a peaceful, legal and generally acceptable way out of the deadlock. End comment.

BOYCE